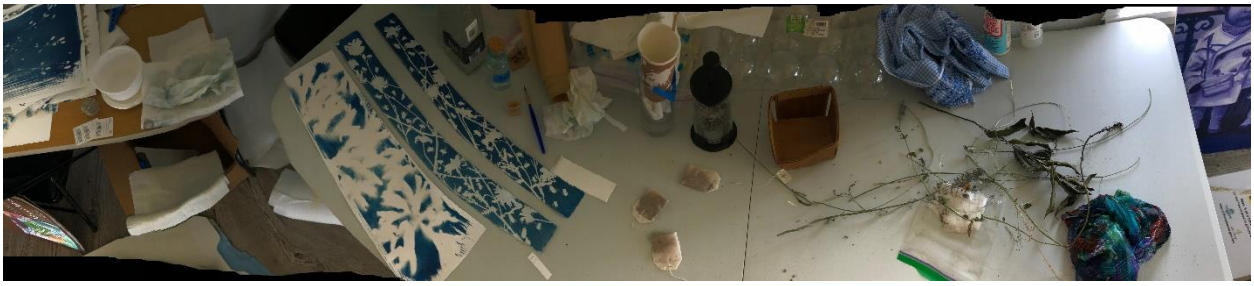
Mercer Hanau: “Garden Ghosts” Residency

Shoreline Art Cottage, Summer 2020

On sunny days, I spent time at the Shoreline Art Cottage experimenting with making cyanotypes and teaching occasional visitors of all ages how to make their own “sun prints” while also exploring the relationships between pollinators, agriculture, and the local Salish Sea environment. I scavenged some natural materials (such as feathers, blackberries, and clovers) from Richmond Beach Saltwater Park, bought produce from my local farmer’s market, and used honeybees that died of natural causes and were gathered by a friend at the Hood Canal Salmon Enhancement Group.



Mercer Hanau Studio materials in situ, photo: DF

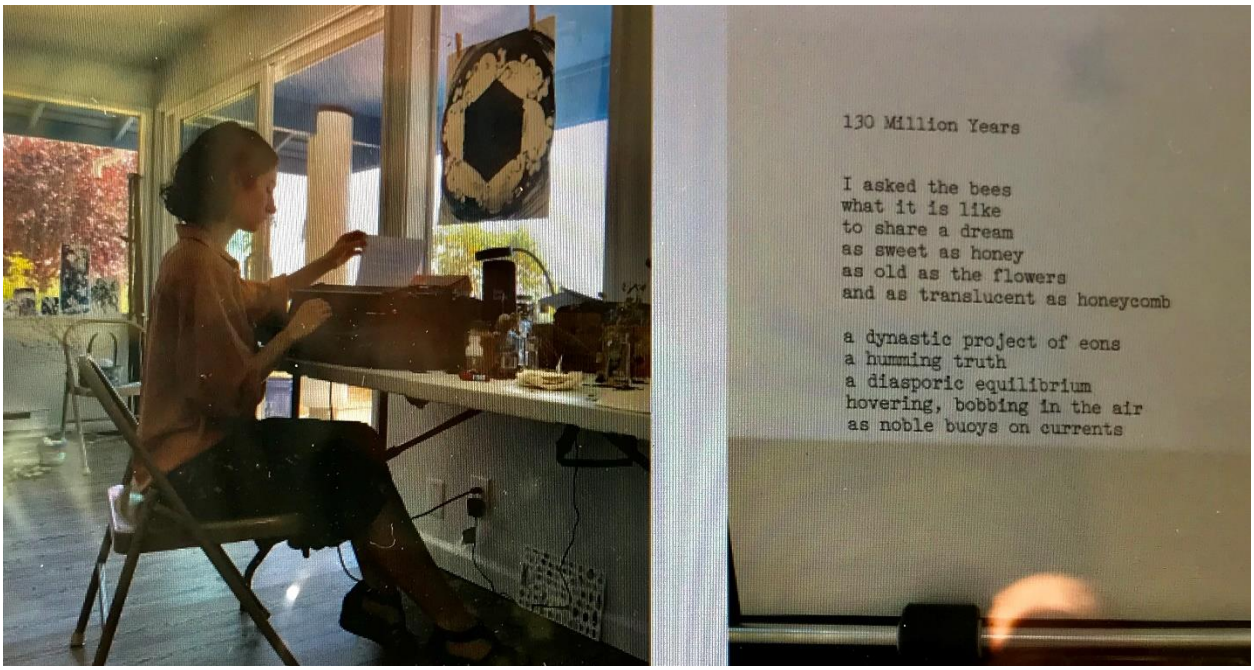
My usual art practice mostly involves printmaking and digital/video work. Although cyanotype is technically an early form of photography, my experience as a printmaker influences how I think about the positive and negative space created by the white silhouettes and dark blue backgrounds. During sun exposure, each print undergoes a series of subtle color changes as the sun’s UV light oxidizes the iron salts in the non-toxic cyanotype emulsion that was painted on paper or fabric and allowed to dry. The characteristic blue only appears after rinsing the cyanotype to stop the oxidation process and wash away excess emulsion. This transformation is one reason behind the title of my residency, “Garden Ghosts,” but it also refers to how I view pollinators and cyanotypes themselves as existing in a framework of *liminal spaces*—thresholds or transitional spaces.

I often think of shadows as symbols of absence, since it’s an absence of light created by the presence of an object. But when you can record an ephemeral shadow and the silhouette remains as a photogram, the object no longer feels permanent. The object that cast the shadow could be long gone, but with a cyanotype, the tangible absence remains. I see my work as “speculative fiction,” a vision of a future in which many plants and foods that we love disappear as a result of pollinator loss. A view of this future frames ordinary objects—strawberries, lemons, lavender, honey, apples, coffee, etc.—as someday belonging in cabinets of curiosities from a bygone era of biodiversity.

With that frame in mind, when I first proposed this project, I was prepared for it to be an anticipatory eulogy. Like many people, I was under the impression that honeybees were becoming endangered. However, my chosen subject matter became more complicated when I

discovered that non-native honeybee populations are relatively stable and highly managed, while native pollinators like mason bees, certain species of bumblebees, and wasps are more affected by pesticides, habitat loss, and lack of diverse food sources. In addition, native pollinators actually do the majority of pollinating, since they co-evolved with the plants they are now specialized to handle. Honeybee populations do have issues with mites, diseases, and pesticides, but not to the extent that many scary headlines would have us believe.

Given this new knowledge, I rooted my artwork in a sense of place and celebratory trial-and-error, moving away from trying to communicate a specific scientific message at the expense of exploring nature in more hands-on and poetic ways. Another unexpected but very welcome part of my process was using the cottage's typewriter to write poetry for the first time in years, some of which found its way into my visual work. I still value research and the ability of art to communicate and draw people into complex issues, but I wanted to focus on experimentation in this residency, especially as the ecological issue turned out to be more nuanced than expected.



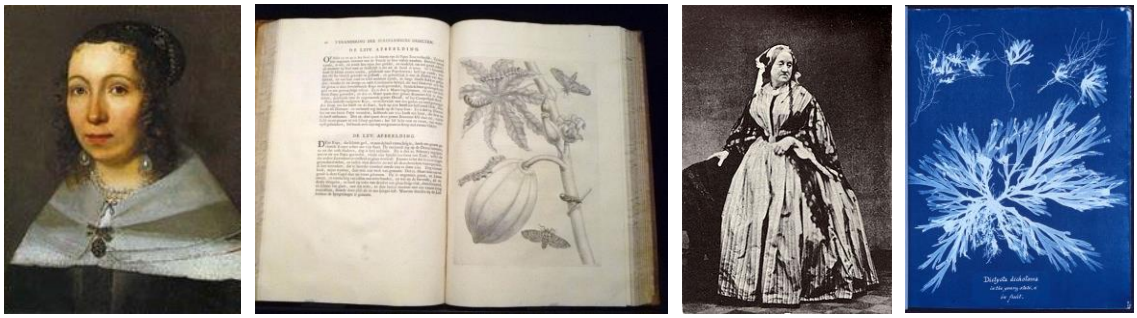
Mercer Hanau at Art Cottage Typewriter and poem, "130 Million years"; Photo: courtesy of the artist

The public interaction component of my residency was very rewarding and enlightening, both for me personally and for visitors. Several people said getting to make art was an unexpected highlight of their trip to the beach, and they enjoyed being able to learn something new about art and ecology at the same time. Visitors to the cottage tried experimental methods I hadn't thought of, like drawing directly on the emulsion with chalk or using broken crab pieces to make a humanoid figure in a narrative scene. Children asked great questions about insects and the art process itself, and adults often shared their observations of

pollinators in their own gardens. Over the summer, almost 80 people visited the cottage. I estimate about half of them made a cyanotype with me.

A few of the visitors to Mercer Hanau's residency; Photo: courtesy of the artist

As a female artist inhabiting the intersection of science and creative expression, I wanted to pay homage to the legacies of past and contemporary women whose influential work combines these seemingly-disparate fields with a sense of wonder for the natural world. In the 17th century, Maria Sibylla Merian painted elaborate scientific illustrations of ecological relationships and lifecycles. In the 19th century, shortly after the invention of cyanotype, Anna Atkins used the new technique to create the first book that included photographs, *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions.* Annie Dillard's contemporary nature essays carry simultaneous senses of reverence for the macro- and microscopic scales of the universe.



Maria Sibylla Meriam, 1679; a 1730 edition of *Metamorphosis;* Anna Atkins, 1861; cyanotype from *Photographs of British Algae*, 1843; [all Wikipedia, public domain images]

These kinds of role models are important to me because, when I was a teenager, I felt very insecure about pursuing art when I also loved science. Strict STEM subjects are often seen as more valuable but didn't always come to me as naturally. I wish that back then I had more representation of women making artwork in this underappreciated intersection. That's one reason why I think public interaction, especially with families, is so important. I want to show the next generation the joy and value that can be found in curiosity and interdisciplinary exploration.

- Mercer Hanau, https://mercerhanau.com/